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Mapping the causes of radicalisation. The case of the Boko Haram adherents

Introduction¹

¹ This article was written as part of project no. 2015/19/N/HS1/02398, entitled *Background of the development of Islamic fundamentalism in northern Nigeria. The case of Boko Haram* financed by the National Science Centre, Poland.

Boko Haram² is an organisation established about 2002 by a Muslim preacher Muhammad Yusuf (1970-2009). In the beginning of its existence, it was a loosely bound group of students with their charismatic teacher, Yusuf. He conducted a preaching campaign in the north-eastern part of the country, which rapidly gained wide support in the region. In 2002, after several years of public action, his position became strong enough to enable him raise funds and establish an Islamic teaching centre in Maiduguri, the capital city of north-eastern Nigerian State of Borno. He named the institution *Markaz Ibn Taymiyya* (Ibn Taymiyya's centre), after a 13th century Damascene scholar, considered as the spiritual father of Salafism. Yusuf's vibrant opinions and oratorical skills earned him sound position among local Muslims. He called his followers to abandon laic type of education (*boko* in local Hausa language), which in northern Nigeria is often equated with Western influence as a result of colonial history. Between 2006 and 2009 many of Yusuf's supporters obeyed his teachings and dropped out of university education (Interview A). The second fundamental aspect of Yusuf's teachings was the rejection of the Nigerian state as illegitimate. He supported this position quoting the fact that a secular state like Nigeria is built on the basis of human law, while the only legal power in the world is derived from God. Following Yusuf's teachings, Boko Haram has been struggling to overthrow the Nigerian state and build structures of what they consider as Islamic government ruled in line with sharia (Interview D).

In July 2009, Yusuf was killed alongside hundreds of his followers, in a summary execution conducted by Nigerian security forces in Maiduguri. The violent incidents and the demise of Yusuf in that year created factions among the leaders, leaving the organisation in disarray. His close associates such as Mamman Nur, Khalid el-Barnawi, and Abubakar Shekau, parted ways, each followed by his own loyalists and sympathisers (Interview B). Since then, Shekau has led the most active and violent faction that caused mayhem, particularly in the north-eastern, but also in other parts of the country. His group is said to be

² 'Boko Haram' is a nickname given to the organisation. Its full name is *Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihad 'ala Minhaj al-Salaf* (Arabic for: 'Association of the People of the Sunna for Preaching and Jihad According to the Salafi Method'). It also operates under a shorter version of the name: *Jama'at Ahl al-Sunna li'l-Da'wa wa'l-Jihad*. In March 2015, Abubakar Shekau, one of the organisation's leaders, gave it one more name: *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya Wilayat Gharb Ifriqiya*, (Arabic for 'The Islamic State, West African Province') in order to mark the allegiance he pledged to Islamic State (Brakoniecka, 2016, p. 14). In the present paper I use the more popular name 'Boko Haram' to refer to the organisation. It must be noted that at the time of writing this paper the organisation remains deeply divided, with many fractions under distinct leadership. The name 'Boko Haram' is used here to denote all of the groups of Muhammad Yusuf's followers, for the sake of clarity.

responsible for thousands of deaths,³ constant threats of terrorist attack, mass abductions and other criminal activities against civilians (Amnesty International, 2015).

According to statistics quoted by Counter Extremism Project,⁴ there might be few hundreds of core Boko Haram fighters and several thousands of local sympathisers who fight for it (Counter Extremism Project). While many of its members were simply forced to join the organisation under death threat to their lives or that of their family or relatives (Amnesty International, 2015), coercion is not the only method of recruitment into the organisation (Mercy Corps, 2016). People are also motivated to join Boko Haram by other factors related to both religious and non-religious spheres.

The aim of this paper is to answer the question of the reasons Muhammad Yusuf's teachings and Boko Haram campaign gained support among local communities in northern Nigeria. To answer this question, I adopt Alex P. Schmid's classification of factors contributing to radicalisation presented in his paper *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review* (Schmid, 2013). The data for the current study is based on interviews with Muhammad Yusuf's followers, local researchers and academics, conducted by the author during field research in northern Nigeria in 2017 and 2018. Furthermore, academic literature, as well as NGO reports have been used to supplement the primary data.

According to Alex P. Schmid, the study of the root causes of radicalisation and terrorism was for long considered to be politically incorrect among many Western societies (Schmid, 2013, p. 3). Peter Neumann claims that this perception intensified especially after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when the study on drivers for radicalisation was interpreted as an 'effort to excuse and justify the killing of innocent civilians.' (Neumann, 2008, p. 4). In the light of these views, it should be clarified here that the aim of the paper is not to present the justification for the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by Boko Haram in northern Nigeria. Rather, it is to discuss the motivations that led to radicalisation from a purely analytical perspective. It is also noteworthy that the author is aware of the fact that an exhaustive approach to the proposed topic is almost impossible, as causes of radicalisation may vary depending on the personal characteristics of recruits and other factors. Thus, it is

³ According to Uppsala Conflict Data Program, until the end of 2016 more than 20 000 people were killed in the Boko Haram rebellion in Nigeria, though part of this number were killed by the Nigerian security forces. Another 9 000 people were killed in 2015 and 2016 in the violence perpetrated in Nigeria by Islamic State, which is associated with Boko Haram on these territories (Uppsala Conflict Data Program).

⁴ An international NGO created in 2014 with the aim to counter the narrative and on-line propaganda of extremist groups.

understandable that other authors may indicate alternative, though not completely different set of factors.

Causes of radicalisation

Despite the huge amount of research on radicalism and radicalisation these concepts remain imprecise. Most definitions consider ‘radicalism’ as a state of standing at distance from mainstream political thinking or representing an extreme section of a party/society etc., while ‘radicalisation’ refers to a process leading up to this condition (Schmid, 2013). The noun ‘a radical’ is strongly relative and subjective, as its meaning depends on the speaker’s position. To picture it clearly, we can track the changes of its meaning in different historical periods. For instance, in the 19th century, ‘radicals’ were those who pleaded for the equality in voting rights not related to gender or social status, and for the introduction of democracy – positions that would rather be labelled as ‘reformist’ than ‘radical’ today. As Alex P. Schmid put it, ‘while in the 19th century, “radical” referred primarily to liberal, anti-clerical, pro-democratic, progressive political positions, the contemporary usage (...) tends to point to the opposite direction: embracing an anti-liberal, fundamentalist, anti-democratic and regressive agenda.’ (Schmid, 2013, p. 7).

Alex P. Schmid attempted to separate the concept from relative notions and described ‘radicalism’ in a two-point definition. In his opinion, radical thought/attitude should be understood as ‘advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical’, whereas radical action/behaviour is characterised as ‘the means advocated to bring about the system-transforming radical solution for government and society [that] can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution)’ (Schmid, 2013, p. 8). As we can see from Schmid’s definition, radicalism is not unavoidably connected to violence. Military action may, but not necessarily, appear at some stage of radicalisation.

Having in mind the very relative nature of radicalism, we can still map the causes of radicalisation with special focus on the growth of Boko Haram. In his discussion on the state of research on radicalisation, Alex P. Schmid (2013) distinguishes three groups of contributory factors, placing them on different analytical levels:

1. Micro-level factors: these are attributed to the level of individuality which might involve problems with identity, hampered process of integration, sense of alienation, relative deprivation, marginalisation or discrimination, moral outrage and desire for revenge;

2. Meso-level factors: these are related to the influence of ‘radical milieu’, a concept introduced by Peter Waldmann and Stefan Malthaner. In their opinion, drivers of radicalisation include, among others, ‘political and social processes that involve a collectivity of people beyond the terrorist group itself (...).’ (Malthaner, 2010, p. 1). Other factors to be placed on the meso-level are in-group relations and their effects such as the comfort of comradeship, sense of brotherhood and the thrills of adventure (Schmid, 2013).

3. Macro-level factors: these are related to the role of government and society. In this category, we find radicalisation of public opinion and politics, difficult relations between majority and minority groups, and lack of socio-economic opportunities for the whole social groups, which lead to mobilisation of the underprivileged.

While most researchers agree that a set of possible internal and external factors that may foster radicalisation exist, it is essential for us to understand that there is no single pattern of this process. We should rather admit that various factors can possibly contribute to radicalisation. What adds to the complexity of the issue is the fact that many findings are applicable only locally, because risk factors occur in particular, often very narrow regional contexts (Schmid, 2013).

Factors related to individual level

Muhammad Yusuf was considered by many as an outstanding preacher who had the audacity to speak out against the malpractices of powerful government officials and to challenge the corruption ravaging the society. He framed this criticism in religious terms, referring to ideas of Islamic revival as a means of tackling these mundane problems. His charisma helped convince his followers that a change was only possible if the tenets of Islam were rebuilt. He applied the concept of *takfir* (excommunication) to condemn those who do not comply with his interpretation of Islamic rules as non-believers. Many among Yusuf’s followers were attracted to him by their quest for religious devotion and puritanism. The religious motivation to join Boko Haram has continued to be in existence after the death of Yusuf. After the organisation launched its military activity, some of the new recruits were motivated to partake in what is wrongly called by the organisation as Jihad that provides a reward in paradise (Mercy Corps, 2016).

The other reason why Boko Haram gained strong support is that its leaders have openly criticised the impunity of the Nigerian security forces, including the police and army officers, and called for active resistance. Nigerian security forces have a bad reputation of using unjustified violence. They are regularly reported committing extra-judicial killings in

the name of law enforcement. Their repressive activities are especially noticeable in north-eastern region of the country, where more than 4500 civilians were executed by security officers just between 2006 and 2014 (Afeno, 2016). Muhammad Yusuf strictly rejected and heavily condemned the security forces for impunity, corruption and violence against civilians. This criticism was once again, framed in religious concepts. He sought reasons to call the army polytheists, pointing at common military practices like saluting officers, paying tribute to superiors, and accepting cross-shaped medals, as actions against *tawhid* (Yusuf, 2008). In this context, considering that he was arrested numerous times and kept under surveillance as a person suspected of sedition, he had become a local hero in the fight against polytheistic – in his opinion – security officers who represent an illegitimate state. His fame as an anti-establishment crusader reached its highest peak when he was killed on July 30, 2009 in a summary execution conducted by the Nigerian security forces. Since then he has been regarded by a substantial section of his followers as a martyr in the fight against the secular, un-Islamic government. His followers became even more determined to stand up against Nigerian state and security forces than they used to be when he was alive (Interview C).

Alongside the above-mentioned resentment against the security apparatus is the desire for revenge. As Alex P. Schmid noted, ‘many acts of terrorism are motivated by revenge for acts of repression, injustice and humiliation and (...) a tit-for-tat process can evolve after a while’ (Schmid, 2013, p. 36). This type of drive is particularly meaningful in the case of mobilisation to Boko Haram. More than half of the casualties of Boko Haram rebellion were civilians killed by the state security forces (Uppsala Conflict Data Program). For instance, in July 2009, the police and army officers extrajudicially killed about 800 people just within five days (Amnesty International, 2015). The importance of the desire to retaliate was confirmed by Anneli Botha and Mahdi Abdile, who in 2015 and 2016 questioned 119 former Boko Haram fighters in Borno and Adamawa States. It turned out that 57 percent of former fighters indicated that revenge was the only or the main drive for their mobilisation to the group (Botha & Abdile, 2016). Most of them lost relatives or friends as a result of military intervention and they felt obliged to avenge these deaths, or they simply no longer had anything to lose.

The role of ‘radical milieu’

Stefan Malthaner, who coined the term, grasped the function of the radical milieu as follows: ‘Even if their violent campaign necessitates clandestine forms of operation, most terrorist groups remain connected to a radical milieu to recruit new members and because they

depend on shelter and assistance given by this supportive milieu, without which they are unable to evade persecution and to carry out violent attacks (...) Sharing core elements of the terrorists' perspective and political experiences, the radical milieu provides political and moral support' (Malthaner, 2010, p. 1). Alex P. Schmid also stresses the key role social (and kinship) networks play in radicalisation process. He equates it with the role similar networks play in mobilisation towards street gangs. Usually, people are more vulnerable to accept extremist ideas in 'dense, small networks of friends' and when these ideas are articulated by charismatic or credible leaders (Schmid, 2013, p. 27).

In the first years of its existence, Boko Haram gained a strong foothold in local communities. Leaders of the organisation, including Muhammad Yusuf and his in-commands, took advantage of the grievances around government's ineffectiveness, an attitude that is so much widespread in northern Nigerian communities. People in that region are deprived of access to public officials to express their disappointment and request for social services. On this ground, many of them are receptive to the influence of anti-establishment initiatives of the likes of Boko Haram. The existence of general public support for the ideas propagated by Boko Haram at the initial phase of its activity was stressed by about half of former fighters interviewed by the Mercy Corps organisation (Mercy Corps, 2016). One of the female interlocutors from Borno State was quoted as saying: 'The community perception about [Boko Haram] was that... they are a new sect that is coming in peace because at the beginning they showed love and concern, and [they] provided things to needy people of the community.' (Mercy Corps, 2016, p. 14). This stance was confirmed in other reports. According to Kyari Mohammed, Boko Haram initially constituted a Muslim social movement, catering for the vulnerable, orphans and widows (Mohammed, 2014). Muhammad Yusuf had raised numerous initiatives to improve his followers' well-being. He lent money to his followers which enabled them to invest and trade in the Monday Market of Maiduguri. He provided *achaba* motorbikes to his supporters on significantly lower charges than other entrepreneurs in the city (K. Mohammed, personal communication, July 2, 2017). Through these methods, members of the group became a very close-knit community. The author's interviewees also reported very close, almost family-like relations in the group, which constituted Muhammad Yusuf, his in-commands and their followers. The interlocutors mentioned instances of nights spent under one roof with the teacher and joint night prayers, among other signs of intimacy (Interview A & C).

The role of 'radical milieu' is noticeable in the recruitment process of new followers. Social connections play key role in radicalisation and recruitment into Boko Haram. Many of

the former fighters interviewed by Mercy Corps cited family members, friends or business peers who have joined the organisation before them and affected their own decisions (Mercy Corps, 2016). Similar findings were presented by Botha and Abdile. Their research concludes that about 60 percent of the ex-members were introduced to Boko Haram through people close to them, such as friends, family and neighbours (Botha & Abdile, 2016). The influence of relatives and close friends towards the mobilisation to Boko Haram has been confirmed by several sources and informants. One of Muhammad Yusuf's followers was familiar with his teachings since early childhood. *Malam* ('teacher' in Hausa) Yusuf used to visit his home-village when he was in primary school. He recalled that his whole family and neighbourhood attended Yusuf's sermons. After meeting Yusuf again in 2000s, this time as a student in the University of Maiduguri, he found it only natural to join Yusuf's followers, as it was typically not a new thing to him. At that stage, the role of milieu was visible again. The interlocutor and his friends always attended sermons in peer-groups, using special buses that drove students from the university campus to *Markaz Ibn Taymiyya* (Interview A).

Macro-level drivers for radicalisation

The growth of the Boko Haram group was accelerated by historical factors closely related to the colonial episode. The British colonial policy appears to be partial in providing developmental opportunities for the southern and northern region of the country. Firstly, unlike in the north, the British invested more in infrastructural development and economic growth in the south. Secondly, while the colonial administration popularised missionary schools and introduced the secular type of education mostly in the south, it applied an indirect rule system in the north, using the already existing local administrative structures of the Sokoto Caliphate to control the society (Máthé-Shires, 2005).

This inconsistency in the politics of the colonial administration resulted in widening the gap between northern and southern parts of the country in terms of economic development, living conditions and level of education. Despite the existence of Nigeria as a single entity for several decades after the end of the colonial rule, these disparities are still noticeable in many ramifications. The north-east, which is an area that has been mostly affected by the Boko Haram rebellion, is a region with the lowest indicators of child school enrolment and the highest percentage of people living below poverty line in the country.⁵ An

⁵ According to Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, in 2013 a Multidimensional Poverty Index for the whole country amounted to 0.303, whereas in the states most affected by the Boko Haram rebellion it turned out to be significantly higher: 0.401 for Borno, 0.635 for Yobe, and 0.471 for Gombe States. MPI reflects income-based poverty, as well as other deprivations like access to education, health and living standards (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2017).

uneven development of secular education led to the aversion to the Western type of education and its adherents. At some point, graduates from the secular universities were called '*yan boko* (in Hausa 'modern-educated elite') – a term that became pejorative over the time. Different radical groups (e.g. Maitatsine, among others) have tried to re-establish this aversion, using it as an explanation for their rejection and disdain for Western influence in the region. Boko Haram is the most recent of such groups that call for the abolishment of secular education in northern Nigeria.

Many youth join Boko Haram because of economic reasons, although their motivation seems to be far more complex than what we could just capture as poverty-driven radicalisation (Mercy Corps, 2016). One of the motivations pointed out by ex-members interviewed by Mercy Corps organisation was a prospect of gaining financial support. Nearly half of these people had their own businesses before joining the organisation and have collected loans to sustain or expand their investments. Interestingly, there was a similar scheme that appeared in several accounts provided by the interlocutors. Young owners of small businesses were offered cash loans by a benefactor who later demanded for either instant repayment or the indebted person to join Boko Haram or be killed. This practice resembles methods of extortion used by organised criminal gangs that offer favours and later demand outrageous price to be repaid (Mercy Corps, 2016).

Joining Boko Haram may also provide security of business and property owned by the recruited, as well as protection for their families. As one of the ex-members described it: 'I officially joined them [Boko Haram] when they started killing indiscriminately in Bama. Because I needed an identity to remain safe, I decided to pledge my allegiance to them. At that time, I needed protection and immunity from persecution by them, so I could continue with my business. When they attacked Bama and took over the military barracks and burned all the houses in our community, my family's house was spared.' (Mercy Corps, 2016, p. 12). It was obvious for residents in the areas affected by the Boko Haram rebellion that collaboration with fighters was the easiest, most immediate guarantee of security.

Finally, radicalisation towards Boko Haram has been accelerated by lack of good governance. The conditions in northern Nigeria are conducive for the proliferation of criminal activities. Porous borders along the Lake Chad region in the north-east, sometimes with zero border control, facilitate weapon smuggling and illegal, undocumented migration. This unmanned region also serves as a gate to the Sahel (Ch. Osakwe, personal communication, July 13, 2017), especially Chad and Libya, providing ground for potential cooperation with the Islamic State fighters. Worse still, the boundaries to the western borders of Sahelian

countries such as Niger and Mali, affected by the presence of Al-Qaeda of Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), facilitate rapid exchange of intelligence and free movement of fighters (Interview B). The lack of efficient de-radicalisation campaign on the side of the Nigerian government leads to many distortions, like the penetration of Boko Haram recruiters in IDPs camps, where deprived residents succumb to radicalisation (Ch. Osakwe, personal communication, July 13, 2017). Even in the early days of its existence, deficiency in governance played an important role in the initial mobilisation to Boko Haram. Muhammad Yusuf spoke boldly against pervasive corruption among Nigerian officials which is one of the factors that earned him strong support within the society. Many of his speeches centred on the apparent injustice and corruption of the Nigerian government, a position that understandably resonates well with his audience.

Conclusions

Since its inception, Boko Haram has posed a serious threat to Nigeria's national security. Through its wide range, unpredictable terrorist activities, the organisation has destabilised every-day life in the affected territories of northern Nigeria in particular, and the Lake Chad region in general. Boko Haram is by far the most violent and lethal radical organisation in modern Nigerian history. It is accused of committing numerous atrocities, including killing of civilians, rape, mass abductions, forced displacement, suicide attacks by children, etc. This paper analyses the motivations that lead some people to support this organisation. Based on their context, these driver factors were discussed on three levels of analysis.

As would be seen from the foregoing discussion, micro-level factors which are related to the sphere of individuality, personal attitudes, individual worldview, and particular interests, play a significant role in the process of radicalisation towards Boko Haram. Some of the followers have been driven to join the organisation by the desire to partake in military campaign that is wrongly considered – in Boko Haram circles – as a struggle in the name of God, and familiarise with Muhammad Yusuf's puritanical teachings on the religious revival. People were motivated to join the organisation by the frustration related to the impunity of Nigerian security forces which is often seen as one of the factors substantially responsible for violence in the country. People are eager to swell the ranks of this organisation to express their disapproval of state power abuse, especially when these transgressions are committed by the state actor under the controversial label of fighting religious extremism. Many Boko Haram members and sympathisers had lost their loved-ones in the hands of police or army

officers. In this vicious circle of violence, these victims may decide to join Boko Haram in order to avenge the deaths of their relatives.

Causes connected to a radical milieu, categorised by Alex P. Schmid as meso-level factors, are remarkably valid in the case of northern Nigeria. The people of the region, who have been experiencing lack of opportunities for an improvement of living conditions for years, are prone to support new approaches. Original concepts are alluring especially when they combine the idea of religious renewal with social assistance offered to the destitute, a phenomenon that was particularly prevalent at the initial phase of Boko Haram activities. It was also shown that the process of mobilisation to the group is more effective, if close friends or relatives are engaged. In the case of Boko Haram, close social network serves as a suitable ground for successful radicalisation.

Following Schmid's classification, macro-level drivers for radicalisation are those large-scale processes involving radicalisation of public opinion and relations between social groups. These factors include intergroup grievances and prejudices that could be traced in the early history of the country. Among these factors is the deep disproportion between the regions of Nigeria which coincides with religious divisions. The history of education in the country served as a basis for biases in perception of those who have attended or graduated from secular schools. As a result, condemnation of laic educational system by the preachers of Boko Haram has aggravated the common reluctance towards secular schools. Moreover, it was proven that economic factors played a crucial role in the process of recruitment to the group, though it does not reflect the overrated pattern of poverty-driven radicalisation. Many people who join Boko Haram are relatively well-off, run their own businesses and ask the organisation for further financial support. Finally, an important macro-level driver for radicalisation is the governance vacuum that allows for potential contacts or cooperation with terrorist organisations active in the Sahel region (Islamic State, AQIM). Lack of good governance in general and effective border security in particular, coupled with the lack of efficient de-radicalisation and preventive policies, accelerate the growth of extremism in the region.

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Interviews

Interview A – with a follower of Muhammad Yusuf, who attended his sermons from around 1997 to 2009. The interview was conducted by the author on July 21st–22nd, 2017, in Kano, Nigeria. The interlocutor requested anonymity.

Interview B – with one of Muhammad Yusuf's in-commands, former Boko Haram preacher in Kano State. The interview was conducted by the author on July 26th, 2017, in Kano, Nigeria. The interlocutor requested anonymity.

Interview C – with a sympathizer of Muhammad Yusuf, who attended his sermons between 2007 and 2009. The interview was conducted by the author on July 29th, 2017, in Kano, Nigeria. The interlocutor requested anonymity.

Interview D – with a follower of Muhammad Yusuf. The interview was conducted by the author on August 14th, 2018, in Kano, Nigeria. The interlocutor requested anonymity.